

Funding Student Learning

Later this spring, 2,878 graduates of the six Fox Cities school districts will receive their diploma. As they enter college or begin a career, the graduates of the Appleton, Little Chute, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Menasha and Neenah school districts will face challenges that you and I did not face. These graduates and those who follow them in future years need the best preparation that their schools can provide.

In employment and in family and community life, our graduates will need to recognize a problem and solve it. They will need to sense an opportunity and know how to pursue it. They will need to embrace technology and mathematical complexity; read with speed and comprehension; write and speak with clarity and persuasion. They will need to sense when to serve as a member of a team and when to step forward as a leader. They will need to contribute to their family, pitch in to help a neighbor, and serve the needs of the greater society.

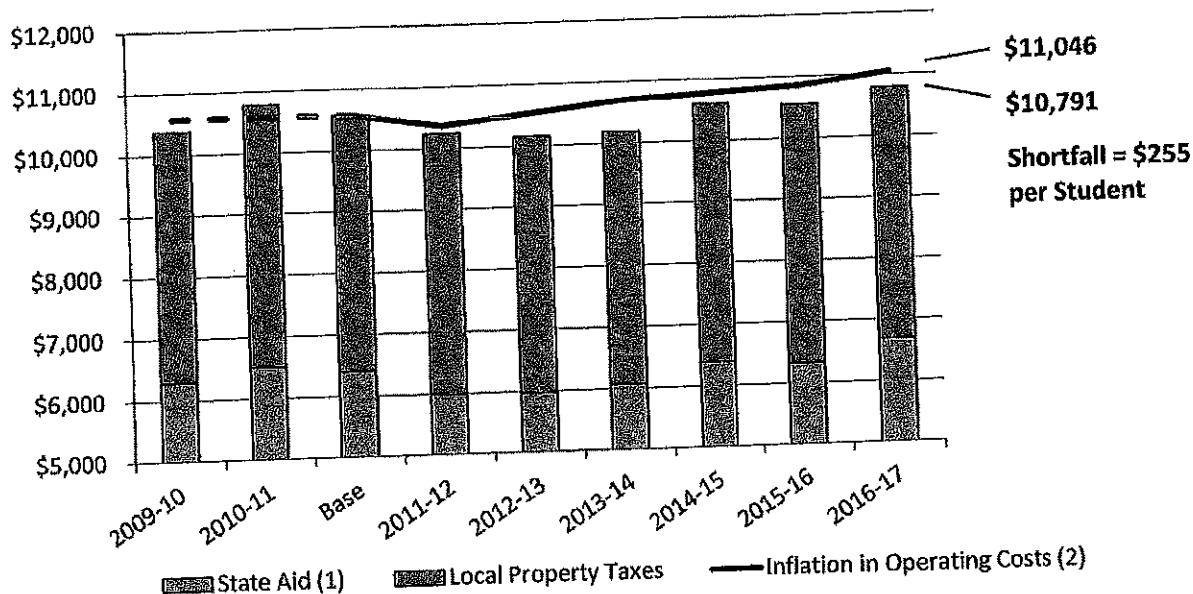
Students learn useful skills and acquire desired traits through academic courses, co-curricular activities and coaching from teachers and other staff. These resources require funding. The Blue Ribbon Commission can help by selectively funding learning activities that produce results.

Fox Cities Advocates for Public Education recommends that you take three courses of action:

1. **Index revenue limits to the cost of living.** From 2011 to 2017, funding for the six Fox Cities districts from state aid and local property taxes grew just 5.4% while operating costs increased 6.6%. The shortfall over the six years totals \$255 per student.

One cause of the shortfall is uneven funding from year to year.

Public School Funding per Student in the Fox Cities From State Aid & Local Property Taxes



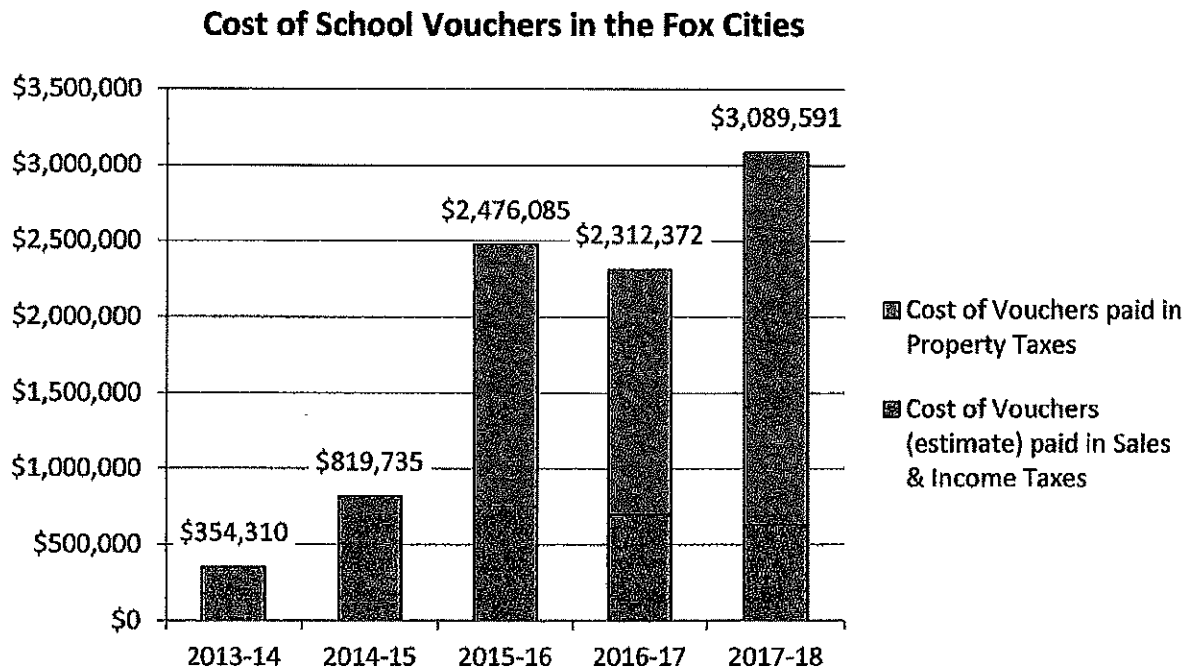
(1) Includes both general and categorical aid.

(2) Inflation in operating costs since the base "year". The base is the average of operating costs for 2009-10 and 2010-11. The reduction in cost of staff benefits in 2011-12 due to Act 10 is included.

Since about 80% of a school district's budget pays for staff, the shortfall in funding causes districts to operate with fewer teachers and larger class sizes. When teachers cannot give children enough individual attention, student outcomes decline.

2. **Increase aid for special education to 30% of costs.** According to the Department of Public Instruction, the state currently reimburses school districts for only 26% of their costs. According to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, the shortfall for Fox Cities schools totals \$41,537,028 for the 2015-16 school year. To compensate for this shortfall, districts transfer funds from regular education to special education activities. The amount of the transfer averages \$1,330 for every student without a disability. School districts are therefore forced to fund one group at the expense of the other.
3. **Phase out school choice vouchers.** The criterion for retaining a program should be evidence that it improves student learning. Since 57% of voucher students in the state-wide expansion attended a private school prior to receiving a voucher, their learning is unchanged. For the 27% who switch schools, studies consistently show no improvement in test scores. Recent large scale studies in Louisiana, Indiana and Ohio show declines in academic achievement in voucher programs.

Five years of school vouchers in the Fox Cities have cost local taxpayers \$9,020,037.



Alternatively, the \$9 million diverted to vouchers could reduce class sizes. Districts could add part-time coaches to teach athletes teamwork. Schools could employ para-professionals to help children read and specialists to help dyslexic kids become more self-sufficient. These activities help students learn. They produce results.

Suppose that choice advocates were to redirect their efforts from subsidizing parental choice of schools to expanding parental support of learning. Encourage schools to undertake joint parent-teacher initiatives that assess student progress and offer learning games designed for parents and their children. Some parent-teacher programs also connect families so one family can support another. The Academic Parent-Teacher Teams initiative is a solid example that shows promise.

Your objective and the criteria for your decision-making should be student learning. If an activity improves outcomes, then we need it. If it doesn't improve outcomes, we can't afford it.

References:

Para 1, Number of graduates: <http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/portalHome.jsp>

Para 5, Public School Funding per Student in the Fox Cities:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1kKODBarVJQsYtUjSOxtj4EzgcJTmy2qbuYL6lZXfrNE/edit?usp=sharing>

Para 8, Special Education Costs:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XBsOyUZMfUw57vTEWXUaD4ru_K9C4_rhrGuGjsypddg/edit?usp=sharing

Para 9, Student Learning Not Improved by Vouchers:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1npaL9HVXbrdZ1mz36Ugm9yTeBAi0XAv_Wv6dLmqvelc/edit?usp=sharing

Para 10, Cost of School Vouchers in the Fox Cities:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1sFalaGDYXm8HWUCHsYS7-LWWZcQlzfbrYCYW4caey3U/edit?usp=sharing>